

LOOKING IN A MIRROR BACKWARDS

by Stanley Melburn Campbell



he stereotype of a librarian seated behind a large reference desk stamping books and telling patrons to be quiet is just a figment of the imagination when it comes to a small town library. Many of the traditional rules just do not apply. That is even more so when you are trying to enter the twenty-first century on a ridiculously limiting budget.

When I first discovered that a theme issue featuring “The Image of the Librarian” was being planned I ignored it. I was hardly the average image of a librarian, I did many things wrong, and so I reasoned no one would be interested in what I had to say. Then after having a few weeks to think about it I realized that I should write a few words.

My own career as a librarian got under way just over eight years ago. I honestly tried to fit into the stereotypical mold perfected by my retiring predecessor. Admittedly I had my own concept of what a typical librarian should be, based on those librarians I encountered over the years, and was amazed how erroneous that concept truly is in a real-life situation. This held especially true on those days when I pull an eleven-hour shift and work solo.

Patrons simply expect their librarian to be able to do just about anything. Personally I love being a detective, researching answers to questions and uncovering some obscure fact that results in creating a great research paper or report but there are occasions when I help locate the neighbor’s cat or dog.

Then, despite efforts to avoid it, the information specialist in a small town is of course the librarian. Often you are the final authority on a subject because you are expected to have all the pertinent data at your fingertips.

The reputation of the library rested on my shoulders. All that responsibility made me nervous, until I finally accepted the fact that I was the one in charge and needed to establish my own foundation for operating the library.

The Poseyville Carnegie Public Library is a rare commodity for a community our size. Although the library was constructed in 1905 and despite an extensive renovation and remodeling project completed in 2000 and weekly publicity in the local papers, there are still individuals who think we are an abandoned building. Others accustom to the habits and traditions of our previous library director who served for over 45 years are surprised to discover games being played in one room, computers dominating another and a learning resources room almost exclusively designed around children.

When I started as library director it was difficult to get children and young adults into the library. For six years now I have been collecting data concerning patron reading habits, seasonal changes, and popular trends in entertainment. I have been shifting our material purchases accordingly. Of course monetary shortfalls interfere with the scope of these purchases and from year to year it is easy to tell when funding was sparsely distributed.

SIDEBAR: I can condense my image at the Poseyville Carnegie Public Library to the following job titles: babysitter, repairman, security guard, medic, public relation specialist, advisor, artist, mentor, business consultant, councilor, loan agent, tutor, detective, confidant, excuse, alibi, and friend.

-Stanley M. Campbell-

I've lost count of the number of times I go shopping on my days off just to purchase items for our programs or to pick up books. I read every dust jacket of every book we receive, view every video, play the computer games and listen to all of the books on tape. I have acquired a reputation for being a walking card catalog of what is available on our shelves. Admittedly, I do forget things like who has what item checked out and if a particular patron has read a given book in a series before, but I know the cheat codes to the computer games we loan out.

We are overrun with school age kids. Now do not take this as a complaint because I enjoy working with them. The bicycle rack I had made by a local welder is always full and there are usually several propped against our steps or scattered haphazardly on the lawn. A close good friend, amazed at the number of children regularly visiting our library, once told me she would not be surprised to discover one of the kids had arrived at the library on a pogo stick. If that ever occurs I will take a picture of the event. Honestly, I have actually come to anticipate those rare quiet times when I can accomplish routine paperwork but during the summer such moments have become virtually nonexistent.

On the other hand, our library has a number of elderly patrons who grace our premises once a month. They complain about any and all changes. One lady complained to my predecessor that there were so many kids in the library she was afraid to come in and wanted

us to deliver her romance books to her home. Then there is a lady who becomes irritated at the very sight of computers and calls them an abomination and thinks I should have them removed. Then there is a gentleman who always shows up five minutes before closing wanting to access an Internet site he saw advertised on television but has no idea how to use a computer and keeps me working another half hour.

When we increased our hours from twenty-two to forty a week other patrons were not only horrified but also confused. Yet another lady wrote a letter stating that when she came to the library we were always closed and, despite our hours being posted on both entrances and published weekly in the local newspaper, she stated she and her friends could never find us open.

Admittedly my situation is probably trivial and of my own doing. I spend considerable time just listening to patrons' problems that are unrelated to library services. And yes I deliver books to several elderly patrons' home when they are unable to visit the library. Of course I stay overtime just to help late arrivals. It is my image and I have to accept it.